

Governance Pilot Project: Fort Severn First Nation

As a community, Fort Severn First Nation is grappling with many issues common to other First Nations, including the desire to increase transparency, accountability and responsiveness of government, as well as clarify the roles and responsibilities of Chief, Council and administration. In seeking solutions, the First Nation looked to its governance traditions for guidance.

The Fort Severn First Nation's governance project objectives were to discover traditional values and identify "what used to work". It was recognised early on that the challenge lay in discovering how traditions could be applied in a contemporary setting. To meet this challenge, the project co-ordinator interviewed a large number of Elders and distributed questionnaires to community members. Land based activities involving Elders formed a staple of this reflective community process. For example, one approach combined the delivery of a Level 1 canoe tripping certification course with discussions with Elders about principles that traditionally governed individual and social behaviour, and government.

With respect to outcomes, several among many proposed responses to current issues are notable. First, in an effort to increase responsiveness and accountability, the report recommends several mechanisms to improve communication between Council and community. These include, for example, reintroducing traditional practices such as home visits by leaders, and reporting to the community on meetings attended outside the community by members of Council or by other First Nation representatives.

With respect to government structures, an Elders Committee is envisioned, fulfilling the combined roles of an appeal court, an auditor general and a senate. Also, a standing committee to report on the financial affairs of First Nation Council and Administration has been recommended.

Finally, youth are being encouraged to attend public meetings, to watch, listen and learn, and to offer their views and perspectives. This report highlights the fact many of its recommendations can be implemented through actions rather than funding. For example, adherence to traditional values, providing Elders with certificates recognizing their participation and contributions to community governance, communications activities such as community meetings and home visits by leaders are all identified as "no cost" or "low cost" solutions.

The Fort Severn experience will be of general interest to other First Nations, in particular for the way it framed a community-based process in order to find solutions to contemporary governance issues. This involved "bringing the past forward" through a close examination of traditional values and governance traditions.

Excerpted from *First Nations Governance Pilot Projects: Challenge and Innovation*. A Final Report Prepared for the National Centre for First Nations Governance by Carleton University Centre for Community Innovation. February 2005.